



# STEP INTO A COWORKER'S SHOES TO KNOW WHERE HE'S COMING FROM

Do you ever go to work dreading a conversation with *that* co-worker – the one you just don't mesh with and often find difficult? For the sake of meeting your work goals *and* for your own happiness on the job, developing satisfactory relationships with even the difficult people is important. And one of the things you can do to improve work relationships is to improve your communication skills.

## A NEW PAIR OF SHOES

Putting yourself in your co-worker's shoes is the first step toward better communication. Start by accepting that the other person's personality type, work style, goals and/or priorities may be different than yours. For example:

- » Someone with a detail-oriented work style may want to make sure to dot every "i" before moving forward, while a higher-level thinker might be more interested in implementing policies as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- » An employee in the office of a regulatory agency might emphasize the clarity and consistency of the rules; an inspector in the field might focus on making sure enforcement actually protects the public.

Seeing things from your co-worker's point of view doesn't mean you have to agree with him; it means understanding where he's coming from and being open to a dialogue.

## ACTIVE LISTENING

The next step to effective communications is *active listening*. Instead of mentally fuming while the other person speaks, or thinking about how to defend against her comments, make a real effort to take in what she's saying. The following techniques help you pay attention *and* tell the other person you're listening:

- » Give nonverbal signals: maintain eye contact, nod or interject "okay" or "mm-hmm" when the other person makes a point. Your body posture says a lot, and the speaker picks up on and responds to your non-verbal cues.
- » Repeat back, in the other person's words or your own, the speaker's salient points. You might say, for example, "What I hear you saying is..." and restate her point. The other person will feel heard and have the opportunity to clarify anything you've misunderstood.

## VALIDATION

You've shown that you heard the other person; next, validate what was said by commenting on its merit. You might say, "I understand how you can see things that way," or "What you're saying makes some sense." After statements such as these, it's time to express your point of view.

Validation increases the chance the other person will be an active listener and appreciate what you're saying. Good communication skills are contagious!

## STANDING YOUR GROUND

You've listened, you've validated. Now you want to make sure your opinions are being heard as well. That's where assertiveness comes in.

Assertive individuals recognize that every one of us has rights and responsibilities. They speak up for their own best interests while taking others' interests into account as well. The basic message sent by an assertive person is, "I'm okay and you're okay."

An aggressive person, on the other hand, recognizes his or her own rights but ignores the rights of others, often using aggressive (or passive-aggressive) language, or aggressive body language (such as leaning in, glaring or pointing).

To improve your work relationships, it's important to communicate assertively, but not aggressively. Try these tips:

- » Stand straight and steady, and maintain eye contact.
- » Speak in a clear, steady and audible voice.
- » Speak fluently, without hesitation, and with assurance and confidence. (Try stating your point of view without prefacing it with "I think" or "Maybe.")

### ONE FINAL TIP

In this age of email, it's easy to avoid face-to-face communication, even with co-workers who sit across the aisle. Email has countless advantages, but it can also be dehumanizing. When you're deciding whether to send an email or have a face-to-face discussion, know that a warm "good morning" and a smile can go a long way toward improving communication.

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